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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007959

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KMPI JO

SUBJECT: DEATH OF PRISON INMATE AND RELATED ABUSE
ALLEGATIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) A report on abuses in Jordanian prisons, including the alleged beating death of an inmate, has prompted government and press inquiries. End Summary.

DEATH AT AL-JUWEIDEH

2. (U) On September 19, the Jordanian press made public a report by the Jordanian National Center for Human Rights (NCHR) claiming "serious human rights violations" at some Jordanian prisons. The report, given earlier in the month to the GOJ, highlighted the death of a prisoner at the Al-Juweideh Correctional and Rehabilitation Centre (notorious for housing some of Jordan's most violent detainees) following a severe beating by prison guards during an inmate brawl September 1. The report further claimed that inmates at other prisons were being subjected to "beatings, lashings, as well as suffering from other human rights breaches."

3. (U) Also on September 19, several GOJ ministers, NGO representatives (including NCHR Commissioner Walid Saadi) and other concerned parties met at the Public Security Department (PSD) to discuss conditions at correctional facilities and the inmate death referred to in the NCHR report. Justice Minister Salah Bashir announced that a ministerial committee had already been formed to probe prison conditions and that a criminal prosecutor was working with police to file criminal charges against those responsible for the inmate's death. "Those found involved in this incident will be legally prosecuted and the rule of law will apply to everybody regardless of their status," Bashir pledged in a statement quoted in the press. He added, however, that he did not believe that there was a "systematic practice" of prisoner abuse in Jordan and said that a series of surprise prison visits during the year had all resulted in "clean reports."

TOO MANY INMATES, TOO FEW CELLS

4. (U) Bashir acknowledged that most correctional facilities in Jordan exceeded their capacity. He noted that while Al-Juweideh was designed to house 1,072 inmates, 1,645 prisoners were at the facility when he and Interior Minister Samir Habashneh conducted an inspection on September 17. (NOTE: Around 30 prisoners staged a hunger strike in July 2004 in protest against overcrowding and food quality. Amman Attorney General Naji Abdullah eventually convinced them to end their strike.) According to Bashir, the new ministerial committee on prisons was seeking to resolve this problem by expanding prison capacity, speeding up court proceedings for inmates jailed pending trial, and/or deporting foreign inmates.

5. (U) On September 20, Habashneh announced that 200 inmates detained for "administrative reasons" had been released from Al-Juweideh to ease overcrowding. A first tranche of 38 foreign prisoners, some jailed for residing and working in Jordan illegally, had been identified for immediate expulsion to their countries of origin. Government Spokeswoman Asma Khader stated September 21 that the GOJ was planning to rehabilitate a building near Al-Juweideh to house inmates and to construct two new prisons in the Muwaqar and Jerash areas. She added that the government would seek to provide vocational training to inmates, as well as psychological treatment.

HABASHNEH ON THE DEFENSIVE

6. (U) During a meeting with NGO representatives on September 22, Habashneh criticized the NCHR report, claiming that it "distorted facts and gave a brutal image of Jordan to the world." He stated that his decision to release 200 detainees had put the police "on alert" since such individuals "engage in fatal street fights and are ready to be hired to hurt citizens in return for money." Earlier in

the week, Habashneh reminded reporters that prison security was a serious issue as some inmates either smuggled weapons into prisons or fashioned them inside to engage in violent acts.

17. (U) Responding to Habashneh's statements, NCHR Commissioner Saadi told the press that the report accurately presented his organization's findings based on personal interviews and prison visits, but said that the government investigations "will have the final say." While he "did not want to defend administrative detention," Saadi acknowledged that some detainees "will commit crimes" when released and that a fair balance needed to be achieved between people's right to fair and speedy trials and society's right to live in peace and security.

PUBLIC REACTION

18. (U) Outside the GOJ, the NCHR report prompted a flurry of public statements and press editorials. MP Mohammad Agel (West Banker, Balqa- 4th Dist.) told Arabic daily Al-Dustour that he and other members of Parliament would press for the issue to be dealt with in a firm and transparent manner. Head of the Professional Association's "Freedoms Committee," attorney Samir Khurfan, called for the review and amendment of the prisons law to help stop the harsh treatment of prisoners. The prominent new Arabic daily Al-Ghad carried critical commentaries by several jurists on a proposed new government ban on corporal punishment, which noted that such a ban already exists but lacks mechanisms for enforcement.

19. (C) Contacted by post, human rights activist Jamal Rifai stated that the NCHR report was "fair" and obviously based on proper field research. He disagreed that the report would give Jordan a bad image, and said Habashneh should have lauded, rather than criticized, the NCHR's efforts. Dr. Fawzi Samhouri, another prominent activist, remarked that the allegations in the NCHR report were "not surprising," and that the GOJ needed to revise prison conduct regulations and practice better oversight to improve conditions.

PRESS CLAMPDOWN

10. (C) The publisher of a major Jordanian daily told PAO and IO September 23 that his and all other publications had received a letter from the Ministry of Interior forbidding further reporting on this issue. On a possibly related note, the September 23 edition of prominent weekly newspaper "Shihan" omitted any mention of the prison scandal, despite the fact of its having been a front page story in each of the dailies for several days running. Shihan is known as a Mukhabarat-linked paper that reflects the views of Jordan's East Bank security establishment.

COMMENT

11. (C) Allegations of harsh prison conditions and prisoner abuse are nothing new in Jordan, but the death at al-Juweideh and the NCHR report have thrust the issue into the spotlight. The GOJ appears to be taking the matter seriously and has notably engaged civil society members; Habashneh's comments and the media gag order, however, demonstrate the GOJ's extreme sensitivity to the subject. The NCHR, derided by some as a GOJ mouthpiece given its quasi-governmental status, has gained new credibility and respect by its report, but may likewise come under pressure to not further "embarrass" Jordan on the world stage.
HALE